



Background

The problem of childhood obesity has been growing rapidly in recent decades.

Today, 80% of children who are obese through childhood remain obese as adults. Current studies project that one in three children will develop Type II diabetes by adulthood. Other serious long term health problems including heart disease can also develop through their lives, putting them at risk for shortened life spans.

Nearly one in four military applicants are rejected for being overweight or obese, a situation that the National Bureau of Economic Research calls a national security threat.

These figures are caused by a growing trend of inactivity in children's lives. To fight childhood obesity, we must ensure that children not only eat more healthy food, they need to stay physically active and fit. What better way than going to and from school. In 1969, 42% of children ages 5-19 walked or biked to school. However, by 2009 that number had dropped to 13%, contributing to a significant rise in traffic around schools that increases the safety risk to children walking or biking. That same year 23,000 children biking or walking were injured in auto involved accidents and 250 killed. The effects of auto pollution on the air that our children breathe are significant; one third of schools reside in "air pollution danger zones," which contributes to a 75 percent increase in asthma in the last 25 years. It is evident that the decline in biking and walking has seriously endangered the welfare and health of our nation's youth.

Solution

In 2005, Congress established the Safe Routes to School Program (SRTS) to fund safe pedestrian and bike facilities near schools and teach children safe bicycling and walking behavior. As a result, an increasing number of children are able to walk or bike to school in a safer environment.

The Safe Routes to School program has been tremendously successful. A recent study has shown that schools receiving funds from this program see increases of 20 to 200 percent in biking and walking. Furthermore, the California Department of Transportation estimates that SRTS reduces 49% of child-related pedestrian or bike accidents.

However, high school students from ages 12-19 are left out of the program and are the most vulnerable to obesity. Over the past 15 years the rate of obese high schoolers has tripled to a staggering 17.6%. This group cannot be ignored in the fight against childhood weight problems. In addition, the partisan battle over the 2012 Surface Transportation Reauthorization significantly weakened the popular and successful program.

As Portland's Commissioner of Public Works, Blumenauer promoted traffic calming measures and safe bicycling facilities around schools, a precursor the City's Safe Routes to School program, which started in 2000. In Congress, Blumenauer has been a staunch supporter of the Safe Routes to School Program and introduced a bill Safe Routes to High School Act (H.R.4021) to allow high schools to participate in the current program. By passing this bill and increasing funding for Safe Routes to School programs, we can stem the tide of childhood obesity and work towards a healthier, brighter, and safer future for our children!

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